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THE MERCHANT ADVENTURERS OF BRISTOL IN THE FIFTEENTH CENTURY

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ISSUED BY THE BRISTOL BRANCH OF THE HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION,
THE UNIVERSITY, BRISTOL

Price Two Shillings

1962

Ref. lib. 11.2 13
BRISTOL BRANCH OF THE HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION
LOCAL HISTORY PAMPHLETS

Hon. General Editor: PATRICK McGRATH

The Merchant Adventurers of Bristol in the Fifteenth Century is the fourth in a series of pamphlets on local history issued by the Bristol Branch of the Historical Association through its Standing Committee on Local History. It is substantially a reprint of a paper published in the Transactions of the Royal Historical Society for 1928, and the Association acknowledges with thanks the Society's permission to reprint. A few revisions have been made by the author in the light of later researches; charts have been included on the lines of those originally submitted to, but not actually published by, the Society; and a map and three other illustrations have been added. Acknowledgements are also due to Messrs. Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd. for permission to reprint the map, which first appeared in *English Trade in the Fifteenth Century* (ed. Eileen Power & M. M. Postan, 1933), and to Messrs. Methuen & Co. Ltd. for the loan of the block made from it for the author's *Medieval Merchant Venturers* (1954); to the National Buildings Record for permission to use their photograph of Canynges' effigy in St. Mary Redcliffe; and to the Corporation of Bristol for the loan of the block of the swearing-in of the Mayor from Ricart's Calendar.

The series as a whole is planned to include new work as well as authoritative summaries of work which has already been done, and it is hoped that it will appeal to the general public as well as to students and school children. The three pamphlets already published are *The Bristol Hotwell* by Vincent Waite, *Bristol and Burke* by P. T. Underdown, and *The Theatre Royal: the first Seventy Years* by Kathleen Barker. Other titles under consideration include *Bristol and Slavery*, Thomas Chatterton, the steamship *Great Western*, the Bristol Riots, Bristol Castle, Reform Movements in Nineteenth Century Bristol, Mary Carpenter and the Reform School at the Red Lodge, and the Bristol Coalfield. A number of pamphlets on the history of the Port of Bristol are in preparation, and the first of them, dealing with the port in the eighteenth century, will be published in the near future.

The pamphlets are issued at the modest price of two shillings in the hope that they may have a wide circulation. They can be obtained from most Bristol booksellers or direct from the Bristol Branch of the Historical Association. It would be a great help if as many people as possible would place a standing order for future productions with the Honorary Secretary of the Local History Committee (Miss Ilfra Pidgeon), Bristol Branch of the Historical Association, University of Bristol.

THE MERCHANT ADVENTURERS OF BRISTOL IN THE FIFTEENTH CENTURY

by E. M. Carus-Wilson

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A shrewd Italian visitor, writing of England more than four hundred years ago, remarked: "There are scarcely any towns of importance in the kingdom excepting these two: Bristol, a seaport to the West, and Boraco, otherwise York, which is on the borders of Scotland; besides London to the South."¹ Now York was not a port, though it traded far afield through Hull; London was a port, but it was so much else that its story is confusingly complex; moreover it was not by the Thames but by the Severn that Englishmen first found a pathway to the New World at the end of the Middle Ages. Hence Bristol, then the second port in England, is of peculiar interest to the student of the still unwritten history of English commerce in the fifteenth century—a history unchronicled, but not unrecorded, and quite as significant as the wars abroad and the strifes at home which have too often earned for the century a character of futility.

Bristol's greatness was indeed built on its trade. It had no old reputation as a cathedral see, as a military station or as a shire town, but as a centre for inland and overseas trade it had unique advantages. Into its market poured goods from a wide circle whose circumference included on the north, Chester; on the west, Milford Haven; on the east, London; on the south, Plymouth. From the north, down the great waterways of the Severn and the Avon, came rivercraft with produce from the rich agricultural regions in the heart of England,² with iron and timber from the Forest of Dean,³ or bales of cloth from Coventry.⁴ Over the hills by carrier came wool from the pastures of the Cotswolds or Mendips or even from further afield.⁵ Up the wide estuary of the Severn came

¹ *The Italian Relation of England*, ed. C. A. Sneyd (Camden Society Publications, No. 37, 1847), p.41.

² The Great Red Book (Archives of the Corporation of Bristol), f.18; *Rot. Parl.* IV, p.346.

³ Great Red Book, ff.18, 23, 210; *Victoria History of the County of Gloucester*, ed. W. Page, II (1907) pp.219-223.

⁴ *Coventry Leet Book*, ed. M. D. Harris (Early English Text Society, 1907-13), pp.260, 594; cf. *Rot. Parl.* III, pp.437, 541, 614, 643.

⁵ e.g. P.R.O. Early Chancery Proceedings, 61/499.

cloth and hides and more wool from Wales;¹ together with fish and tin from Devon and Cornwall.² Moreover, the sudden contraction of this long fiord causes exceptionally high tides. These, rising sometimes to a height of fifty feet, enable vessels to be borne rapidly through the narrow wooded gorge of the lesser Avon into Bristol's sheltered harbour. The Cinque Ports must have envied Bristol the seclusion which gave it immunity from foreign invasion and constant assault by pirates. And while this tortuous gorge guarded against violation by sea, protection from attack by land was easily secured between the encircling Avon and its tributary the "lusty Frome." Where the two rivers met lay Bristol, and to this natural moat was added a turreted wall, pierced by four gateways each crowned by a stately church. From them four streets led to the central market cross, round which stood three more venerable churches and the ancient Tolsey Court. By the fifteenth century, however, Bristol had grown far beyond the circle of those city walls. Across the picturesque bridge over the Avon, with its shops and gabled houses, lay a busy industrial suburb. Here the Weavers' Hall, Weavers' Chapel and Tucker Street marked the fact that Bristol no longer exported the wool coming to her in such abundance, but was converting it into the famous Bristol cloth, and had become one of the leading manufacturing cities of England. Hard by, at the two river quays, each well bound with freestone in contrast to the muddy banks of some notable foreign ports, sea-going vessels were built and loaded. Thence they were despatched with cloth, hides, and other merchandise, to north and south and west.

Three main routes were followed in the early fifteenth century, each of about equal importance, as we can trace in the Customs Accounts.³ All three led away from the traditional centres of European commerce, the Mediterranean Sea, the Baltic Sea, and even the North Sea. For Bristol, opening to the west, looked towards the mysterious Atlantic Ocean, then to all appearance the utmost bound of the earth, and on its shores her merchants marketed their goods, faring forth all unconsciously upon the future great highway of nations.

Near at hand Ireland, then enjoying a period of comparative prosperity and freedom from English control, provided a market for at least a third of Bristol's export of cloth. And from Ireland's flourishing ports, which themselves carried on an extensive trade with the Continent, came merchandise to almost twice the value

1 P.R.O. Exch. Q.R. Escheators Accounts, 238/2: *Antiquities of Bristow*, ed. J. Dallaway (1834), p.111.

2 Ibid.; Early Chancery Proceedings 18/189.

3 P.R.O. Exchequer Q.R. Customs Accounts.

of what she received—corn, linen, timber, cattle, and above all fish, the bulk of which was consumed in England. Trade with these ports was one not in luxuries but in the necessities of life. Thus the Irish Sea was to the West of England on a smaller scale what the North Sea was to Eastern England, and Bristol, as its great mart, had no need to seek the coasts of Norway for fish or timber.

Bristol's second great market was the English province of Gascony. Thence, in return for cloth, came chiefly wine and woad, the principal dye used in the cloth industry. Thus the political union of England and Gascony was strengthened by the economic bond of a traffic equally necessary to both, for, as a Bordeaux merchant remarked, "How could our poor people subsist when they could not sell their wines or procure English merchandise?"

Sailing farther south, Bristol merchants supplemented their supplies of wine from the western coasts of the Iberian peninsula. Thence also luxuries such as figs, raisins and dates were sought in increasing amounts as the century wore on, with sugar from Portugal's new-found colonies, scarlet dye for England's cloth manufacturers, salt and cork. Southern Spain yielded much similar produce, with olive oil also, fine Castile soap and high quality leather, while from those "very naughty havens for great shippes" on Castile's rocky northern shore came quantities of iron.

Bristol's trade then rested on a threefold basis. To Ireland, Gascony and the Iberian peninsula its ships bore cloth. Thence they returned, accompanied by about an equal number of foreign ships, with valuable foodstuffs, raw materials, and some luxuries. This paper is not concerned with the manner of this trade and the methods of its merchants, but with some of the more interesting changes and developments which took place before the time of the Tudors and the discoveries of Cabot.

For before long Bristol's "prosperous felicity" was to be rudely threatened, when at the end of the Hundred Years War the English were expelled from Gascony and one of its three chief markets seemed almost to vanish away. Unlike the gradual waning of England's political power in France, this commercial collapse came suddenly. It is indeed remarkable that in spite of misgovernment at home, of lawlessness on the sea, and of costly and calamitous wars, Bristol's trade seems to have developed markedly up to the very eve of England's final defeat, reaching its zenith just before the middle of the century. This conclusion is suggested by an investigation of the *Enrolled Customs Accounts*.¹ These are extant for almost the whole of the period, and give the total

¹ P.R.O. Exchequer L.T.R. Enrolled Customs Accounts.

amounts of wine and of cloth customed. Like most contemporary figures, they prove in some ways a disappointing guide. Since returns cover the period of office of a particular collector, the figure for any one year cannot always be precisely ascertained. Further, evasion of customs, laxity of officials, especially when there was no efficient central control, the appointment to office of notorious offenders, and the rapid succession of new officials in certain years, all militate against uniformity in the entries; while heavy losses through wreckage, and still heavier losses through piracy, may entirely alter the balance for any one year. Nevertheless the steady continuity of these accounts throughout most of the century makes it possible to deduce the general trend of trade over a period of years, without regard to fluctuations from year to year, though even here allowance must probably be made for abnormal laxity during the civil war. This trend may be traced in the accompanying charts illustrating the progress of Bristol's foreign trade in wine and cloth, its chief import and export.

Here it will appear that imports of wine reached their highest figure during the whole Lancastrian and Yorkist period between 1440 and 1448, and that exports of cloth were largest about the same time. The inference that this expansion marks an increase especially in wine from Gascony is confirmed by the books of the Constable at Bordeaux. These show, for instance, that in the autumn alone of 1443 six Bristol ships left Bordeaux with 1,614 tuns of wine;¹ this is about as much as Bristol's total annual import of wine from all sources early in the century. Again, whereas in 1409-10, of the 212 ships of all nationalities leaving Bordeaux only two had carried as many as 170 tuns,² 170 was now the average tunnage of Bristol's ships, while the *Marie de Wilshore* carried 249 tuns, 69 tuns more than any ship in 1407-8. And these were no exceptional cargoes, as later accounts prove.

But this rapid progress of Bristol's enterprising merchants was eventually to be checked by circumstances beyond their control. For when at last, after the reconquest of all the rest of France, the unwilling citizens of Bordeaux and Bayonne were compelled to open their gates to their own compatriots, their privileges were destroyed, heavy taxes were imposed on exports and imports, and trade with the English was prohibited.³ Only by special licence could it be carried on, and sometimes even the granting of such

¹ P.R.O. Exchequer Q.R. Accounts Various, France, 194/3.

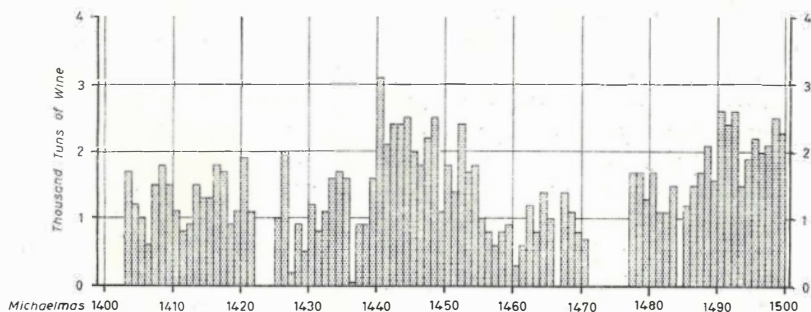
² Ibid., 184/12.

³ Troplong, "*De la fidélité des Gascons aux Anglais pendant le Moyen Age*," (*Revue d'Histoire Diplomatique*, Paris 1902), p.487; Cf. J. Balasque, *Etudes historiques sur la ville de Bayonne* (Bayonne 1862-75), III, pp.499-502; C. Jullian, *Histoire de Bordeaux* (Bordeaux 1895) p.298; T. Malvèzin, *Histoire du commerce de Bordeaux* (Bordeaux 1892), II, p.18.

BRISTOL'S IMPORTS OF WINE AND EXPORTS OF CLOTH 1399 - 1500

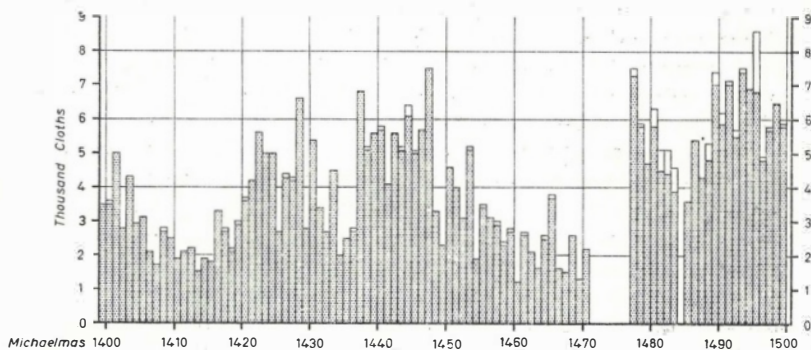
WINE IMPORTS

in tuns per annum (Michaelmas to Michaelmas):
the statutory capacity of the tun = 252 gallons



CLOTH EXPORTS

in cloths of assise per annum (Michaelmas to Michaelmas):
the statutory size of the cloth of assise = 26 yards x 6 quarters before fulling.
The stippled area represents cloth exported by native merchants



NOTE: Accounts normally cover an Exchequer year from Michaelmas to Michaelmas.
Where this is not so, the monthly average over the longer of two adjacent
accounts has been used to adjust both accounts.

licences was altogether forbidden. Thus, as the Customs Accounts show, exports of wine to Bristol fell in the late 1450s to less than a third of what they had been in the 1440s, reaching the lowest level recorded during our period. Charles VII would not, and Henry VI could not, help the merchants.

Many of the Gascons, still preferring English to native rule, came to England, and the number of Bristol's merchants was increased by several of these immigrants. Such were Barnard Bensyn "late of Bordeaux, merchant," Moses Conterayn, "Gascon and merchant of Bordeaux,"¹ who became one of Bristol's most active merchants, and probably also William Lombard "merchant of Bordeaux," who in 1468 was buried in St. Nicholas' Church, Bristol, and whose will is inscribed in the Great Red Book.² Those merchants who remained in Gascony attempted to find other outlets for their wares to England by sending them first to other parts of France. Lack of detailed customs accounts for Bristol between the early fifteenth century and 1461 makes it difficult to trace the effect of such experiments, but at least after that date some wine certainly reached Bristol via Brittany. Later accounts also for the first time record shipments of woad from Caen,³ but this new trade seems never to have been extensively developed by merchants of Bristol. Their interests in France continued to be concentrated on the direct trade with Gascony, and now that Gascony was under French rule, that trade remained restricted, closely regulated, and very hazardous so long as England and France were still at war with one another.

Thus deprived, in large measure, of one of their three chief sources of wealth, in what fresh markets could the Bristol adventurers seek compensation for their loss? Already during their rapid commercial development before the fall of Bordeaux they had embarked on certain new enterprises; two of these might have seemed to offer further possibilities.

The fish trade with Ireland had been supplemented by opening up relations with a larger but less fertile island in the far north—Iceland. In the Icelandic annals Englishmen appear for the first time during this century in 1412. The earliest specific trace of Bristol men comes in the *Libelle of Englyshe Polycye*, and if we put the date of this at 1436 we may infer that they found their way thither "by nedle and by stone" about 1424.⁴ Eagerly did the Icelanders welcome these visitors. For they brought to that snow-capped land in mid-ocean sorely needed necessities of life.

¹ Early Chancery Proceedings, 64/345.

² Great Red Book, f.68.

³ e.g. Exchequer Q.R. Customs, 19/14.

⁴ *Libelle of Englyshe Polycye*, ed. G. Warner (1927), p.41.

at a time when she was in dire straits through the decay of her own seamanship and the neglect of her nominal rulers across the water, when "No news from Norway to Iceland" was the sorrowful refrain of the annalist.¹ Food in plenty was shipped from Bristol—flour, malt, butter and honey. And since Iceland also lacked minerals, there were added pots and pans, horseshoes, shears and locks. Indeed these ships with a medley of hats and caps, needles and thread, girdles and purses, wax, salt, paper, and above all woollen and linen cloth, must have stocked many a pedlar's pack. In contrast to such diversity the Englishmen's needs were monotonous. It was fish that they had come to seek, and the goods that they brought with them were valued in Iceland in terms of the number of fish that could be purchased with each.

A considerable part of this Iceland trade was carried on by Bristol's competitors on the other side of England, as was only natural. For stockfishmongers of Newcastle, Hull, Lynn, and London had the twofold advantage of a long-standing connection with the far north of Europe and of a route which was familiar and direct instead of unknown and perilous². And those curious foreign bishops in Iceland—who were apparently more careful to supply themselves with beer than their flocks with instruction—ordered their provisions usually from England's eastern counties and not from Bristol.³ Yet Bristol's share in the Iceland venture was probably larger than that of any other single port, and many of her leading merchants were deeply involved in it, as was William Canynges for more than twenty years.⁴

For any port, however, profitable though the trade was to both parties, it was fraught with ever-increasing dangers and difficulties. An analysis of these here would be out of place, since it concerns England's eastern ports as much as Bristol and belongs to the far larger story of England's relations with the Hanse. The chief point in which it concerns us is that the Danish king, dominated more and more by Hanse influence, laid more and more severe restrictions on English trade, and virtually strangled it by forcing it to go via Bergen where the Hanse was supreme,⁵ until finally four English ships, one from Bristol, were seized on their way to the Baltic and open war broke out. The war was followed by a succession of truces still seriously restricting the English, until at

1 *Annales Islandici posteriorum saeculorum : Annálar 1400-1800* (Reykjavik 1922-48), I i, 18.

2 cf. Early Chancery Proceedings 59/88.

3 *Calendar of Patent Rolls 1422-29*, p.394; *ibid.* 1436-41, p.58; T. Rymer, *Foedera* (The Hague 1739-42), V, i, pp.45, 56, 75.

4 See, e.g. P.R.O. Treaty Rolls, *passim*, for licences to ship to Iceland.

5 e.g. *Foedera, ut supra*, IV, iv, p.177; *Calendar of Patent Rolls 1446-51*, pp.191, 430.

last Henry VII insisted on freedom of trade in the treaty of 1490.

Thus, though Bristol seamen amongst others sometimes flouted the claims of the Hanse with impunity,¹ in the end their challenge to its supremacy in the northern seas was futile, and no extensive development of their intercourse with Iceland or the Baltic was possible to compensate for the loss of the Gascon trade.

Nevertheless the men of Bristol and other rising ports were not content to traffic only with lands where no powerful interests contested their authority. The same intrepid spirit of daring which impelled them recklessly to ignore Bergen's monopoly and attempt to open up new fields for commerce in unsailed northern seas, drove them also to challenge the haughty vessels of Venice and Genoa, seeking new highways for their ships in waters frequented from the dawn of history. Boldly they pushed through the Strait of Gibraltar to fetch for themselves the coveted spices which they had hitherto meekly received from foreigners; for, from the Pillars of Hercules to the gateways of the East, the mighty Italian cities still reigned supreme in the mid-fifteenth century, as the Hanse reigned supreme in the North.

The history of Bristol's earliest attempts is inseparably bound up with the name of the great pioneer, Robert Sturmy, one of the most notable but least known of Bristol's citizens.² His last ill-fated expedition arrested the attention of more than one fifteenth-century chronicler, but the allusions to him in modern histories (like those to John Taverner of Hull and other pioneers beyond the straits) are slight and misleading.³ So we may well gather up what evidence has come to light about one commemorated in Bristol as a "ful notable worshipful marchaunt."⁴

Little is known of his early career. In contrast to William Canynges and his distinguished family he stands out as a solitary figure of obscure origin. No detailed customs accounts survive for the years during which he must have been actively trading, so we have no means of knowing in what goods he trafficked or with what lands he had dealings in an ordinary way. Almost his only recorded transactions are those exceptional enough to need licences; his only known ventures those which came to a tragic end. His experience as a merchant was gained in part through provisioning the king's forces in France. On July 30th, 1436, he secured a

¹ e.g. Early Chancery Proceedings, 19/316. The English have been accused of acts of violence in Iceland; these were in many cases committed against oppressive Danish officials whose discomfiture rejoiced the Icelanders. See, e.g. *Icelandic Sagas*, Rolls Series (1894), IV, pp.436-7.

² Spelt variously Sturmy, Sturmys, Sturmyn, Starmyn, Stormy, Stourmy, etc.

³ One historian, for example, from a single reference to Sturmy concludes that he "carried on a considerable trade in the Levant." Abram, A. *Social England in the Fifteenth Century* (1909), p.36.

⁴ Great Red Book, f.96.

safe-conduct to go thither in the company of the Earl of Huntingdon for victualling Aquitaine, but this protection was withdrawn in the following November, since he still tarried at Barton Regis in Gloucestershire.¹ A few years later, however (1441-2), he shipped to Bordeaux for the king's subjects 78 weys of corn valued at £98. 14s. 4d.²

In 1444 he was sufficiently well known in Bristol to be chosen Bailiff. In the following year the Venetians were driven out of Egypt and the monopoly of the Italians in the Levant began to be broken. Not long after, with shrewd insight, Sturmy was planning his first recorded expedition to the Mediterranean, and procuring for it the *Cog Anne* and a special licence enabling him to share the privilege of shipping staple goods elsewhere than to Calais. Three English commodities were certain of a Mediterranean sale—wool, tin and cloth. For cloth he needed no permit, so the licence was made out on November 3rd, 1446,³ for him to ship 40 sacks of wool and 100 pieces of tin (26,000 lb. in weight) by his attorneys or deputies "by way of the Straits of Morocco" to Pisa. By sending to Pisa he designed to avoid Venice and Genoa, and to deal with a now humbler rival in commerce, namely Florence. But the *Cog Anne's* journey was not to end at Pisa. For she was on her way to fetch from the gateways of the East the spices—pepper, ginger, and the like—which were the most coveted of all the infidel's goods. For this, what outward freight could be better than pilgrims for the Holy Sepulchre?

In 1446, then, the *Cog Anne*, with 160 pilgrims and a crew of 37, charged with 20½ sacks and 12 cloves of wool, and probably other goods too, set sail from Kingrode for Pisa.⁴ Tin may have been taken on board at some Cornish or Devon port. Who was the luckless captain, and who went as Sturmy's representative to parley with the Turks, we cannot tell. Calling at Seville, she passed the ill-omened straits, defiantly entered the Mediterranean, and, perhaps because she was quite an unexpected apparition, arrived safely at Joppa, her goal, and landed her pilgrims. These very likely returned overland—a common method of shortening the undesirable journey by sea.⁵ At any rate the *Cog Anne* did her business and set out for home without them. We know not whether she had secured her spices, for on a dark and gloomy night in midwinter (December 23rd) as she sailed along the jagged coast of southern Greece, there arose a sudden tempest and a mighty wind; the *Cog Anne* was driven on to the rocks off the

¹ *Calendar of Patent Rolls, 1436-41*, p.350.

² Exch. L.T.R. Customs, Roll 19, m. 6 d.

³ P.R.O. Treaty Rolls, 25 Hen. VI, m. 20.

⁴ Exchequer L.T.R. Customs, Roll 19, m. 7 d.

⁵ Cf. *Itineraries of William Wey*, ed. B. Bandinel (1857).

island of Modon and dashed to pieces, and there her whole crew perished "to the extreme grief of their wives and their friends at Bristol." Then came a certain faithful bishop of Modon, gave honourable burial to the thirty-seven bodies, and built and consecrated a chapel from which prayers might arise for the souls of these ill-fated adventurers. Such is the story, as given in two places by William of Worcester.¹ How great a sensation the calamity made is apparent from the stress laid on it in his usually terse and unemotional pages.

Sturmy seems to have been neither ruined nor daunted by so melancholy a shattering of his hopes—he had at least not fallen into the clutches of the grasping Italians whom his petty traffickers must have dreaded more than the elements.

During the next ten years he figures as a prosperous and respected citizen,² doing his duty in such civic offices as only a man of wealth could afford to fill. We find him attending a meeting of the town council (in 1450) to arrange for the spending of a sum of money bequeathed by a fellow merchant for the repair of the town walls;³ being chosen (in 1451) as sheriff; assisting (in 1452) to pass a decree degrading from office an unworthy steward;⁴ and finally elected by his fellow-councillors as their Mayor for 1453-4. More councils had now to be attended, ordinances for the welfare of the town passed and signed, elections presided over,⁵ industrial disputes between masters and men settled;⁶ courts held constantly—the Tolsey court sat at least three times a week; quarrels heard between natives and aliens, customs officer and refractory shipowner, and judgment given sometimes under threat of vengeance from the loser.⁸ Royal mandates, too, had to be carried out, such as that to Robert Sturmy, Mayor, William Howell, Sheriff, Thomas Young and Henry Weston (on May 28th, 1454) to cause £150 to be levied in Bristol by Trinity next for the wages of certain lords and others associated with them for the keeping of the sea.⁹ A special effort had been made this year under the new Protectorate to remedy the chronic state of bad sea-keeping, and it had been ordained in Parliament that money should be collected, and that promptly, from the chief ports.¹⁰ Bristol's allotted share was more than that of any city

1 *Antiquities of Bristow*, ed. J. Dallaway, pp.78, 109.

2 *Ibid.*, p.112, "*venerabilis*."

3 *Great Red Book*, f.17.

4 *Ibid.*, f.18.

5 *Ibid.*, f.186.

6 *Ibid.*, ff.78, 93.

7 *Little Red Book of Bristol*, ed. F. B. Bickley (1900), II, p.151.

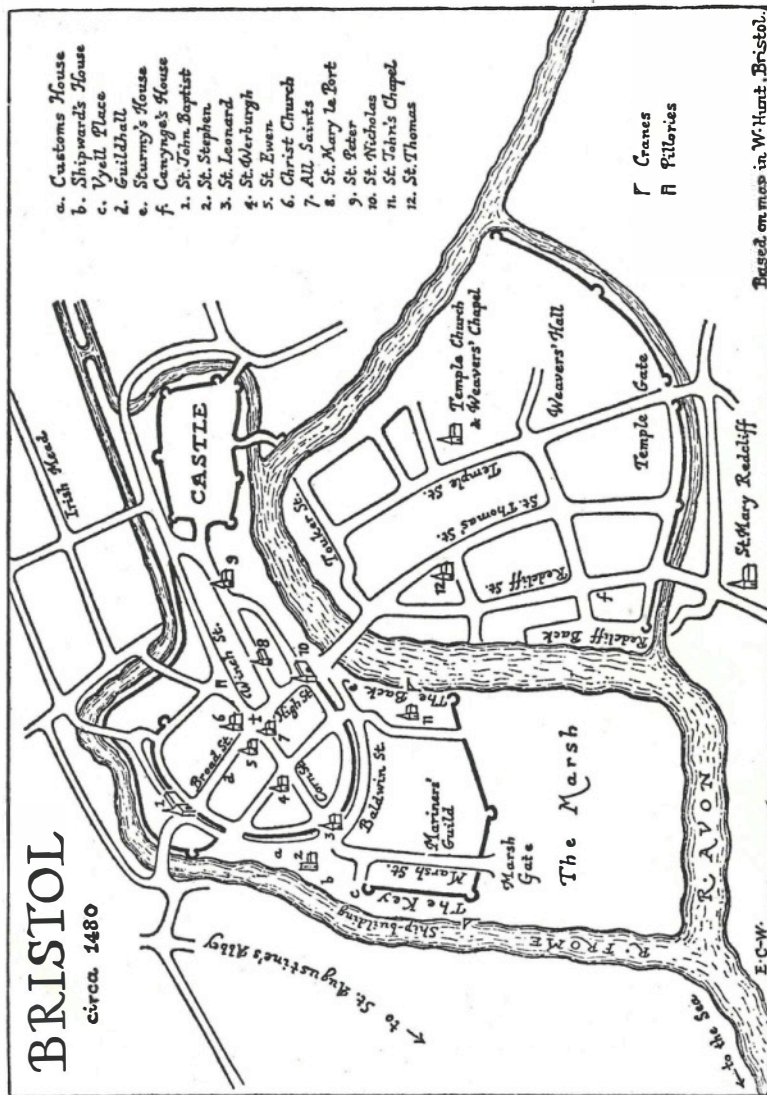
8 Early Chancery Proceedings, 19/122, 24/221.

9 *Calendar of Patent Rolls, 1452-61*, p.156.

10 *Rot. Parl. V.* p.245.

BRISTOL

circa 1480



Based on map in W. Hunt, Bristol.



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A newly elected Mayor of Bristol taking the oath, on a bible handed to him by the retiring Mayor. Both mayors are dressed in scarlet gowns and scarlet cloaks lined with grey squirrel, as is the Sheriff, who stands near by with the aldermen and other members of the Council. The Town Clerk reads out the oath, and beside him is the sword-bearer with the Mayor's official sword and hat. These and other city officers wear particoloured robes. Outside the bar stand the commons, in everyday clothes of blue, red, green, etc. Over the dais are the cross of St. George, the royal arms, and the arms of Bristol, with ship and castle. Picture from the Calendar compiled by Robert Ricart, elected Town Clerk of Bristol in 1479.



Photo F. J. Palmer

William Canynges, "wealthiest and wisest of the merchants of Bristol," who retired at the end of his fifth mayoral year (1467-8) to become a priest. This fine effigy of English alabaster, carved in his lifetime, shows him as Dean of Westbury-on-Trym, where he died in 1474. It is now in St. Mary Redcliffe church, with an eighteenth century inscription on a wooden panel behind it.

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In the name of god Amen. the xxij day of June in the yere of our² Lord at
Lond. I Robert Sturmy Thewys Thewys and Thewys of Thewys make my Thewys
in this wise that I begynne my Thewys to god and to our lady / But never
And to alle ye fens of herynd and for ye mure as I am now passing
over the see. Under the mure of god. I be quoth my lady to be buried thow
is most plesing to god. I am to ye moder Thewys of Thewys ye god
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C. 11

except London, which was to pay £300, yet so public-spirited was Sturmy, or so thoughtful for favours to come, that he further assisted matters himself by making "new at Brystow—a stately vessell, only for the warre."¹

Prominent in private as in public life, he was long remembered for his liberal hospitality and his generosity to fellow-merchants whether foreign or otherwise ("*tam pro externis mercatoribus quam aliis generosis*").² We can well imagine him in his fur-trimmed gown of rich scarlet and his golden girdle,³ sumptuously entertaining in his hall some distinguished visitors from foreign parts, with the help of Mistress Ellen his wife and Alison and Jonet her two maid-servants, and keenly questioning them on the distant lands which it was his purpose to visit. We catch a glimpse of him, too, as a parishioner of the church of St. Nicholas upon the wall. There he attended a parish meeting to discuss what was to be done with the seats of those who left the church, for congregations seem to have been as migratory then as now, and to prevent such parishioners from selling them at exorbitant prices.⁴ His presence at a Parish Council is, however, no proof of piety, for St. Nicholas may have had the same rule as All Saints, that absentees were to be strictly fined.

In these years of strenuous public duty Sturmy can have had little time for business enterprises out of the usual, though no doubt he seized every opportunity of gaining first-hand information which would be of service. But as soon as his mayoralty was over new ventures claimed him.

Again in 1456 he procured a licence to take pilgrims, this time to Compostella, to the number of sixty, in his own ship, the *Katherine Sturmy*.⁵ Very likely this was the one from Bristol which joined company with five others at Plymouth on May 17th, and reached Spain on May 21st⁶. Considering all that had to be endured on the journey, it is little wonder that pilgrims did not often choose the long sea route round the Cornish coast.

This voyage was for the *Katherine* but a prelude to a far more daring one the following year. By 1457, when the English merchants, still virtually excluded from Gascony, must have had much cloth on their hands, the Italian merchant cities were losing their grip on the Levant as the tide of Ottoman invasion steadily

¹ *Paston Letters*, ed. J. Gairdner, No. 208.

² Dallaway, *ut supra*, p.112.

³ Will of Robert Sturmy, *infra*, p.13, note 3.

⁴ Vestry Book of St. Nicholas' Church, Bristol. Sturmy also appears in St. Ewen's Churchwardens' Accounts 1454-4; "Item, of Robert Sturmy for a lytyl old bell. vs."

⁵ *Foedera*, *ut supra*, V. ii, 67.

⁶ *Itineraries of William Wey*, *ut supra*, p.153.

advanced. When Constantinople at last fell in 1453, Genoa lost her rich colony at Pera, and her merchants were becoming exhausted by their struggle to protect their Black Sea colonies from the Turks and their western Mediterranean possessions from the growing menace of the rival Catalan fleet. Venice, with greater influence in the Near East by reason of her situation and her superior naval strength, was still able to conclude a treaty with the Sultan, preserving her rights of free trade and of self-government in Constantinople. Such a time of upheaval must have seemed opportune to Sturmy, for he had the vigour and initiative to adapt old resources to changing needs. Once again he resolved that an English ship should fetch spices from the Levant to Bristol, not venturing singly but with two attendant caravels, and that he himself would go with them. Once again, on February 8th, 1457, a licence was procured. Its figures give some idea of the magnitude of the venture which Sturmy conceived. For even if he sold a part of the licence to other merchants, it indicates an English Mediterranean enterprise of an exceptional character. He had permission to ship one hundredweight of lead, 10,000 pieces of tin, 600 sarplars of wool, and 6,000 pieces of cloth—that is cloth worth perhaps £20,000, and wool worth some £7,000 or more¹. Security to the extent of 500 marks was to be left with the customers that the goods were to be sent “beyond the mountains by the straits of Marrok” and nowhere else, and a certificate of their unloading was to be delivered within one year. A month later Sturmy procured a further licence for 40 quarters of wheat to be carried to Italy with other goods.² Three months more must have been spent with John Eyton, who provided one of the ships, in repairing and victualling them, and in collecting cargo in Bristol and elsewhere. At last on June 27th Sturmy made his will,³ beginning as follows: “In the name of God, Amen. The 27 day of June in the yere of our Lord m^lcccc^mlvii, I Robert Sturmy, Burgeys and marchant of Bristowe, make my Testament in this wise. First I bequethe my soule to God and to our Lady Seint Mary, and to alle the seintes of hevyn, and for as muche as I am now passinge over the see under the mercy of god I bequethe my body to be buryed ther as is moost plesing to God.” He must have been hoping for considerable profits from this voyage, for the legacies to his family and to his servants were to be doubled if his ship returned in safety, many more masses were to be sung for his soul, and further sums of money were to be given to the

¹ Exch. Q.R. Memoranda Rolls, Easter 36 Henry VI, m. 37; Treaty Rolls, 35 VI, m. 20.

² Treaty Rolls, 35 Henry VI, m. 6.

³ Somerset House, Wills proved in the Prerogative Court of Canterbury, Stokton, 14.

overseers of his will, the Vicar of St. Nicholas and a Ludlowe draper.

There is no clue as to the date of embarkation or as to what precisely formed the cargo, though it seems most probable that the *Katherine* set out in 1457. Safely she sailed into the Mediterranean and on into "divers parts of the Levant" ("hetheness," as the London chronicler expresses it), "and other parts of the East."¹ Of this stage of the trip only hearsay reached the chronicler, though official documents amply corroborate the main facts. Then, continues Fabyan, "for so much as the fame ran upon him, that he had gotten some green pepper and other spices to have set and sown in England (as the fame went)," the Genoese determined that the *Katherine* should never reach home. So they lay in wait for Sturmy near Malta where the Mediterranean is dangerously narrow, and there they spoiled his ship and another.²

Thus provokingly brief are state records and chronicles alike, but, whatever the damage done, the outrage roused the wrath of the English. All the Genoese in London (their chief English depot) were arrested, incarcerated in the Fleet Prison, and their goods confiscated.

Relations between England and Genoa were further complicated at this time, since in 1458 Genoa, desperately seeking aid against the Turks and against Alfonso of Naples with his troublesome Catalan fleet, had persuaded Charles VII of France to accept the lordship over her city and had handed over its governorship to John of Anjou, the son of the rival claimant to Naples. In that year, therefore, French soldiers were assisting to defend the harbour of Genoa against the Catalans. Moreover French ships had in the previous year (1457) been responsible for the sacking of Sandwich and the burning of Fowey, and were now being vigorously chastised with those of their allies the Castilians by the Earl of Warwick. It is therefore highly probable that the French instigated the seizure of Sturmy's ships by the Genoese. Indeed it has even been suggested that the arrest of their ships and goods in England in that year was merely the natural sequel to their accepting the French as overlords;³ it seems, however, more likely that, as the chronicles relate, the attack on Sturmy immediately prompted such drastic action, especially in view of the magnitude of the damages extorted for it before the Genoese

1 *Chronicles of London*, ed. C. C. Kingsford (1905) p.169.

2 Kingsford, *ut supra*; Ricart, *The Maire of Bristowe is Calendar*, ed. H. Toulmin Smith (Camden Soc. New Series, V, 1872) p.41; *Six Town Chronicles*, ed. R. Flenley (1911), pp.112, 161; *Calendar of Patent Rolls 1452-61*, p.517.

3 *Letters of the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries from the Archives of Southampton*, ed. R. C. Anderson (Southampton Record Society Publications, 1921-2), pp. 14-16.

could be released. For there began a great lawsuit when Philip Mede, Mayor of Bristol, "sewid byfore the kyng and his counseile al the Lumbards Janueys at that time in Englande, bicause of the takyng of Robert Sturmy and of his shippes. Which Janueys, after long sewte of the same, were judged and condempned to pay the saide maire and his brothern the some of 9,000 marcs, to be paide at certain termes."¹ In due time, on July 25th, 1459, Sir John Stourton, Philip Mede, John Eyton, William Canynges, Richard Chok and William Coder were commissioned to receive from the Treasurer £6,000 to be distributed among those involved in the venture,² and the Genoese were delivered from prison.

Meanwhile, what had become of Sturmy? It is clear that he too perished in the very year of the disaster, for his will was proved at Lambeth on December 12th, 1458. Where and how he died is still, however, an unsolved mystery. His tragedy is but an interlude in the story of Bristol's trade. No other record has come to light of similar Mediterranean ventures thence before the time of the Tudors. And though in the reign of Henry VII England had a consul at Pisa whither Sturmy had taken wool, yet for the English the more distant parts of the Levant then still remained "jeopardous and far parts."³

Thus far afield, north and south, disappointment had met the Bristol seamen midway through the century in their attempts to penetrate the spheres of their formidable rivals, the Hanse and the Italian cities, and nearer home the once familiar harbours of Gascony were no longer open to them without question.

Yet this dejection was transient. For there was no decay in their intense vitality and sturdy self-reliance, even in the darkest days of England's defeat abroad and sordid strife at home. Bristol, like most towns, took little part in dynastic struggles and grudging contributions to the Exchequer; and the citizens whom neither marauding foreigner, "over-mighty subject," nor Yorkist nor Lancastrian army had intimidated, scorned to yield to difficulties, and strove anew with conspicuous success to rebuild its trade on the old foundations.

In France, their chance of re-establishing regular trade with Gascony came through the accession of the adroit Louis XI in 1461. His predecessor, Charles VII, had roughly conquered and tried to crush the Gascons, but the more astute Louis realised that in the struggle of the crown to build up a united nation the

¹ i.e. £6,000. Ricart, *ut supra*, pp.41-42 (under year 1459). In Flenley, *ut supra*, p.161, and Kingsford, *ut supra*, p.169, the sum is 6,000 marcs, probably a slip for £6,000.

² *Calendar of Patent Rolls, 1452-61*, p.517.

³ Pollard, A. F., *The Reign of Henry VII*, III, p.169.

bourgeois were his strongest support against the nobles. He therefore won their favour by granting privileges to towns, restoring to many of those in Gascony a large measure of the autonomy which they had enjoyed under English rule. Bordeaux recovered its privileges, foreigners were encouraged to occupy its empty houses, exiles were recalled, and, in 1463, on the petition of the town, trade with England was again permitted.¹ Bristol merchants hastened to take advantage of the renewed opportunity, and went as of old in autumn and spring to seek Gascon wines.² The fall in imports of wine and exports of cloth was checked and recovery began, as the customs show.

Tiresome restrictions, however, still hampered the merchant. Safe-conducts were compulsory, and these had to be purchased for a large sum, and lasted only for a year or two.³ Customs dues were seriously increased, and, among many more petty annoyances, wines could only be purchased inland under French supervision.⁴ Moreover, England and France were not yet formally at peace; each side sought opportunity to strike a blow at his adversary, and, in spite of safe-conducts, many boats fell a prey to pirates or privateers.⁵

It was with the treaty of Picquigny (1475) that trade made a further marked recovery. Then at last the long rivalry between the two nations was brought to a formal close, and the merchant was encouraged not only by the greater security this gave, but also by the removal of many hindrances. Now, as of old, he might sail freely to Bordeaux, and there dwell as freely as any of its citizens, paying much-modified dues and customs. Commynes, true type of the diligent chronicler of the time, after detailing those articles touching the wars of kings and their unruly barons, concludes: "Divers other trifling articles there were touching matters of entercourse, which I overpasse." Louis XI, however, saw further ahead than most of his contemporaries in bringing about this treaty, aptly called by the people of Bordeaux the "paix marchande," which benefited France and England alike not a little. Within five years Bristol's imports of wine had risen apparently to a level at least equal to that of the beginning of the century, while her exports of cloth reached an average as high as during their zenith before the loss of France.

Bristol's rapid recovery and its vitality in the latter part of the century is further shown by its striking progress in shipbuilding.

¹ Troplong, *ut supra*, p.521.

² Exchequer K.R. Customs, 19/1, 3, 4.

³ Early Chancery Proceedings, 27/383.

⁴ T. Malvézin, *Histoire du Commerce de Bordeaux*, II, pp.23, 26.

⁵ E.g., *Cal. Pat. Rolls, 1452-61*, pp.347, 608, 614, 649.

While some merchants still possessed merely a share in a ship, as had probably been the custom at the end of the fourteenth century,¹ many more owned the whole of a ship, and gradually a wealthy class emerged possessing small private fleets, amounting to quite a third of the whole tonnage of Bristol. William of Worcester, that most meticulous peripatetic topographer, who in these very years was diligently pacing the streets of his native city, measuring, noting, and all too seldom annotating, tells us that William Canynges for eight years kept 800 men employed in his ships, and had workmen, carpenters, masons, etc., to the number of a hundred men. Worcester enumerates ten ships as his, including one lost in Iceland, and says that six years after Canynges' death, in 1480, Thomas Strange possessed about twelve ships, and John Godeman also several.² He goes on to specify ten other ships as belonging to Bristol in that year ("*Naves Bristolliae pertinentes*"). These figures are confirmed by the customs accounts for 1479-80, which mention many of the ships in Worcester's list, and give over twenty different Bristol ships trading from Bristol.

More remarkable than the number of ships owned by an individual merchant is what seems an almost fabulous increase in their size. Early in the century few can have carried more than 100 tuns of wine. "Of fifty tuns burden" is one of the few definite specifications we have; the average cargo of Bristol's ships at Bordeaux was 88 tuns (in 1402), though one loaded 179 tuns.³ But by the middle of the century ships from Bordeaux brought on an average 150 tuns. They thus compared very favourably with those of France and Spain; for in the same period the *Great Red Book* gives a list of safe-conducts for French and Spanish ships, varying usually from 80 to 250 tuns, though three are stated to be of 300 tuns and one of 350.⁴ This considerable increase in burden as traced in the customs tends to confirm Worcester's often criticised figures for the latter part of our period, the time of the great shipbuilders. He puts four of Canynges' ships at under 200 tuns, three more at between 200 and 250 tuns, the *Mary Canynges* at 400 tuns, and the *Mary Redcliffe* at 500 tuns, the size of the largest of Warwick's ships in 1464.⁵ The most difficult figure to believe is that of 900 tuns for the *Mary and John*. But Worcester's figures are undoubtedly to be relied upon. We have proved that he

¹ Wadley, T. P. ed., *Notes or Abstracts of the Wills in the Great Orphan Book and Book of Wills*, (Bristol & Gloucestershire Archaeological Society, 1886), pp. 16, 17, 30, 33.

² Dallaway, *ut supra*, pp. 107, 114-115. The figure for Godeman is missing.

³ P.R.O. Exch. O.R. Accounts Various, France, 184/19.

⁴ *Great Red Book*, ff. 38-161.

⁵ C. Scofield, *Life and Reign of Edward IV* (1923), II, p. 417.

was about right as to the total number of Bristol's ships; he was most scrupulous in those measurements which we can check today in Bristol; he is careful to state that the lost ship which could not be accurately measured was "about 160 tuns;" the records of the actual amounts of wine unloaded in Bristol again and again precisely corroborate his assertions; and it is evident that the *Mary and John* was exceptional in its day, for he states that she cost Canynges the great sum of 4,000 marks to build.¹

Only one more proof need here be given of the prosperity of these hard-headed men of business, and it is also a proof that they looked beyond the things that were to perish with the using. For much of the fortunes they amassed they invested not in ventures that were to pass into oblivion, but in those still glorious stone fabrics of their dreams, which have not failed to pay interest abundantly to each succeeding generation. In the midst of the busy city of today there rises one of the loftiest and most beautiful of fifteenth-century towers, built at the sole expense of the merchant John Shipward. His yet more renowned partner in trade, William Canynges, ship-owner, ship-builder and five times mayor of Bristol, splendidly completed the work of his father and grandfather beyond the city walls. His church, St. Mary Redcliffe, one of the last and grandest achievements of English Gothic, mirrors for us the conditions that produced it and the character and outlook of the notable merchants who there lie buried.

It reveals them, in the magnitude of its conception and the wealth of its adornment, as increasing in riches and prosperity in spite of the disasters of the middle of the century. It reveals them further as medieval still, in their conception of this world as of the next. For just as they lavished their wealth on churches still Gothic in form, brilliant in colour and gilding and adorned with exquisite craftsmanship, so they clung tenaciously to twelfth-century trade routes, long sanctioned by custom. Even in their new enterprises they sought only to share with the Hansards or the Italians a time-honoured traffic in northern or southern seas.

But with such a structure as St. Mary Redcliffe, Gothic art had reached its climax, and, in a blaze of glory, vanished. So for the Bristol merchant who had reared it, the old order was on the brink of dissolution. Except for Calais, France was already under French rule. Ireland was presently to languish under the harsh Tudor yoke. Portugal's ancient friendship with England was dissolving through her new affinities with Spain and her staunch allegiance to a religious outlook which to sever both her and Spain from England. For the Bristol merchants who in their wills

¹ Cf. Scofield, *ut supra*, II, pp.410-414; *Cely Papers*, ed. H. E. Malden (Camden Society Publications, 3rd Series, I, 1900), pp.176-7.

endowed chantries where their own souls might be prayed for had sons who preferred to leave money for an almshouse or a school.

Yet even more suddenly than the old world vanished a new world of endless possibilities was to appear, giving ample scope for the experience and skill the Bristol adventurers had gained during the century. For their destiny lay not on the eastern shores of the ocean, long known to them, nor on the seas which they had striven to penetrate in Europe. In 1480 John Jay's little ship of 80 tons sailed forth westwards into the unexplored Atlantic, under one Lloyd "the most scientific mariner in all England," in quest of the fabled island of Brasylle "in the western part of Ireland."¹ Jay returned baffled after many weeks of wandering; but his oceanic enterprise, at the close of a century of many disappointments, heralded for Bristol adventures, of a magnitude as yet undreamed of, upon uncharted seas and unimagined continents.

¹ Worcester's *Itinerarium* in Dallaway, *ut supra*, p.153.

NOTE

Further information about the merchant adventurers of Bristol in the fifteenth century may be found in the author's *Medieval Merchant Venturers* (Methuen, 1954), especially in Ch. I (The Overseas Trade of Bristol), Ch. II (The Iceland Venture), and Ch. VII (The Effects of the Acquisition and of the Loss of Gascony on the English Wine Trade). Chs. II and VII deal with these subjects from a wider point of view than that of Bristol alone. They incorporate the results of new researches undertaken since the writing of the present paper, and this has therefore been slightly amended, where necessary, to take account of them.

Many of the documents quoted in this paper, including Sturmy's will, have now been published in *The Overseas Trade of Bristol in the later Middle Ages* (Bristol Record Society Publications, Vol. VII, 1937, ed. E. M. Carus-Wilson), and also in *The Great Red Book of Bristol* (Bristol Record Society Publications, Vols. II, IV, VIII, XVI, XVIII, ed. E. W. W. Veale). References in such cases have, however, been left as in the original paper. The original Great Red Book may be seen in the Council House at Bristol, as may also the Little Red Book, the Tolsey Court Book of 1489, and Ricart's Calendar with its fascinating drawings; this Calendar, compiled by Robert Ricart who was elected Town Clerk in 1479, gives a full account of the ceremony of installing a new Mayor of Bristol, and of the many duties of the Mayor and other civic officials throughout the year. It also records many notable events in Bristol's history. The records of Sturmy's church, St. Nicholas, were unfortunately destroyed by fire during the bombing of Bristol in 1940.

References here to William of Worcester's Itinerary (preserved in the library of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge) are to the version published in Dallaway's *Antiquities of Bristow* (1834). A much fuller version is that edited by J. Nasmith in 1778, but there is as yet no good critical edition of this most interesting manuscript.

Canynges' house has been pulled down since this paper was written. His church—St. Mary Redcliffe—has, however, escaped destruction by vandals, whether English or foreign, and survives intact, almost exactly as it was in the fifteenth century. Though bereft of most of its medieval ornaments it still contains the tombs, with effigies, of the great William Canynges and his wife and of Philip Mede and his wife, alongside that of Philip Mede's son, besides the superb monumental brass of John Jay and his wife, and the alabaster effigy of Canynges as a priest. For a full description of the effigies see Ida M. Roper, *Monumental Effigies of Gloucestershire and Bristol* (Gloucester, 1931). The brass of John Jay depicts him in the typical dress of a merchant or burgess of the late fifteenth century. He wears a long, full supertunic reaching nearly to the ankles and lined with fur. Note the fur edgings shown at hem and wrists, the sharply pointed shoes, and the pouch at his belt. His wife wears a long gown falling in folds at her feet, tight fitting above the slim waist, with a wide turned-back collar edged with fur. Note also the delicate Gothic canopy and the four shields. Two of the shields show Jay's merchant mark, i.e. the trade mark which would be on his seal, and with which his wares would be marked so as to be readily identifiable. The other two show the tease-frame with which the nap was raised on woollen cloth; this suggests that Jay (or perhaps his father) was a cloth-maker, or at least a cloth-finisher, engaged in the manufacture of cloth as well as its commerce.

